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ABSTRACT

Parents are the most important influence on students and can be a major help in school-to-work programs. Because school-to-work is a new national initiative, however, parents may have limited understanding of the opportunities these systems provide. In national surveys, parents report that they want more information about how to become involved in their children's career planning. National and local programs are thus trying to connect parents to resources that help them to understand the opportunities and teach them how to help their children to develop the attitudes and skills needed to succeed in work. Teachers play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining parent involvement efforts. A strong relationship with a career counselor at the school can also help students to reach their educational goals and to involve parents in helping in the process. Some school-to-work programs involve parents in creating individual occupational plans, similar to the Individual Education Plans developed for students with disabilities. Once parents receive information about school-to-work programs and ideas for working with their children, they often become advocates for the program in their communities. (Short descriptions of effective parent involvement practices in school-to-work programs in three school districts are included in the report. Contains five references and descriptions of six organizations.) (KC)

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★RESOURCE★ BULLETIN

FEBRUARY 1996

Parent Involvement in School-to-Work

Parents, the primary shapers of young people's motivation and values, are in the most powerful position to convince students of the importance of education and productive work. Research, as well as experience in communities around the country, conclusively demonstrates that young people whose parents or guardians are involved in their schooling are more likely to succeed both in school and in the workplace.

As children grow older, the role of parent becomes a balancing act between providing support and encouraging independence. Students gradually assume more responsibility and greater control over their lives as they progress through school towards work. In order to assume adult responsibilities, they need and deserve the opportunities provided by school-to-work systems to interact with and earn the respect of adults. Parents play a key role in this process by providing support and working with counselors, teachers, and employers to develop career opportunities for youth. Parents and guardians who become engaged in school-to-work systems not only improve the future prospects of their children; they also contribute valuable insight to school-to-work partnerships and can serve as community advocates for a school-to-work transition system.

However, the fact that school-to-work is a new national initiative limits how much parents understand the opportunities that these systems offer. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, signed into law in the spring of 1994, has had less than two years to educate Americans about the purpose and the elements of school-to-work systems. Many Americans still hold traditional assumptions about careers, college, and school-based occupational programs. Parents and guardians may not realize that school-to-work systems support advanced training and education for young people, including college and university study. They may fear that integrated coursework will distract their son or daughter from college preparation, channeling him or her into a narrow occupational track.

In addition, today's busy lifestyles often limit parent involvement in school-to-work systems. Social and economic changes in the structures of contemporary families and workplaces often constrain the time and effort parents can devote to the educational and career development of their children. Across the nation, practitioners are applying various strategies to overcome these barriers to parent involvement in school-to-work:

Providing Parents with Information. Eighty-three percent of respondents to a recent survey by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, & Children's Learning identified information about planning for their child's future – college or work – as the most important of nineteen topics about which they would most like information. To address this information gap, national organizations, such as American

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College Testing (ACT), the National Career Development Association, and the National Council of La Raza, have developed programs and activities to provide information and resources to encourage parent involvement in school-to-work initiatives. In the spring of 1994, ACT and the National Career Development Association released *Realizing the Dream,* an innovative program for involving parents in their teenagers' educational and career planning. *Realizing the Dream* contains the resources necessary for a school or community organization to introduce the program during a two-hour workshop, including leader's materials and guides for parents and students. The parent guide and coordinated student guide, distributed for home use, help families progress step-by-step through the career planning process. Local program operators have used several techniques to provide parents with information about school-to-work, including publishing brochures and inviting parents to attend informational meetings, orientations, and workshops. Several school-to-work initiatives have contracted with family resource hotlines, which parents and employers can call for advice and information on education-related issues. In addition, on-line connections to resources and organizations that provide support for families on educational issues offer easy access to a wealth of information.

Parents as Teachers. As the first teachers of their children, parents have a unique opportunity to provide early career exploration and the basic skills necessary to succeed in school and the workplace. As children progress through school, parents can help them learn in the home, monitor school assignments, and encourage career-related activities after school, on weekends, and in the summer. Programs have been developed to help parents understand the dynamics of child and adolescent development and teach the attitudes and skills their children will need to lead a successful life. For example, the Home and School Institute's *Megaskills* program strengthens the role of the family in helping students develop these skills and attitudes, building children's achievement through a series of "home-learning recipes," activities that teach parents how to help their children succeed.

Working with Other Partners in School-to-Work Systems. *Teachers* play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining sound parent involvement efforts. An involved parent is a teacher's ally, coordinating learning in the home with school work, helping the child stay on track in school, and cooperating with teachers to resolve problems encountered along the way. In many high schools, infrequent communication between parent and teacher means that a student is doing acceptable work, because under current policies, high schools contact families mainly to discuss serious academic or behavioral problems. Teachers' unions, such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, are working to make parent-teacher collaboration become the norm, not the exception, by disseminating information regarding parent-teacher collaboration.

A strong relationship between parent and *career counselor* can help students select, develop, and follow through on their educational and career goals. Counselors who give parents access to career information and involve them in individual planning sessions for their children have experienced great success in fostering such relationships. Because career counselors are often overwhelmed by sheer numbers of students, many administrators have made the commitment to support counselors by offering staff development and by establishing lower student-counselor ratios, flexible scheduling, and easier access to career and labor market information.

Many school-to-work systems require that parents co-sign training agreements, a step which initiates communication between parents and *employers*. Some parents take the next step, actually visiting worksites

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and conferring with employers and supervisors to gain firsthand information with which to encourage and support their children. Many employers say they would welcome such contact from parents but are often unsure how to proceed. Some simply need encouragement from school personnel or parents; others need specific advice and "training" in how to structure contact with parents. Partnerships between parents and employers can benefit both parties, particularly where an agreement is worked out with school personnel that provides some structure or procedures. These relationships work both ways: parents call or visit the worksite to learn about progress and problems, and worksite staff contact parents, either directly or through the school, to share information or request help.

Individual Education and Occupational Plans. Similar to Individual Education Plans developed for students with disabilities, individual education and career plans have been utilized in school-to-work systems. Many students and parents do not understand the requirements for student educational and career goals. The development of student plans provides structured time for parents to discuss education and career options with students, counselors, and teachers. The typical plan includes periodic meetings to discuss plans, career exploration, testing, and establishment of a course of study to meet career goals.

Flexible Workplaces. School-to-work practitioners can encourage employers to support their employees who are parents, specifically their involvement in their children's education, by accommodating parent-teacher conferences and sessions to design individual student education and career plans, as well as other visits to school and worksite. Flexible work scheduling arrangements, such as part-time work, flex-time, job-sharing, and telecommuting, also encourage parent involvement in school-to-work. Developers of school-to-work systems can ask businesses to support practices that provide opportunities for parents to play an active part in their child's future.

Promoting Involvement in Advisory Committees and Governance Structures. School-to-work should operate as a community-wide effort, recognizing that parents bring invaluable perspectives to the partnerships that guide local systems. Parents who serve on governing bodies speak with informed voices regarding the experiences of their children in school-to-work. They are in a position to advocate and work for better information, services, and other resources for their children, and to become leaders and catalysts for other parents.

Effective Practices

The **Rochester City School District** employs a parent outreach coordinator to build parent involvement in school-to-work. The coordinator has developed parent/family courses to assist parents according to their needs in the school-to-work system. The parenting/family courses are designed to be interactive sessions which include practical techniques that apply to real-life needs and situations. The topics addressed within the courses include communication, self-esteem, values, stress management, and motivation. Contact: Dorothy Pecoraro, 131 West Broad Street, Rochester, New York 14614. (716) 262-8389.

In **Roy, Utah**, all high school students have a customized student education and occupational plan that lays out their future career goals and the school-based and work-based learning experiences they need to attain these goals. Counselors work together with students and parents to develop the goals in meetings

held one to four times a year. The counselor provides information, assesses students' talents and skills, ensures that students take the needed classes, identifies appropriate work-based learning opportunities, and directs students and parents to other resources. Counselors are flexible, scheduling meetings before, during, or after normal school hours in order to accommodate parents' schedules. Contact: Sharon Kamp, 2150 West 4800 South, Roy, UT 84067. ★ (801) 774-4922.

The **Academy of Finance at Lake Clifton Eastern High School** in Baltimore, Maryland, maintains an active parent advisory council to disseminate information and help guide the operation of the Academy. The council hosts seminars on topics of importance to parents, including financing postsecondary education. The executive board of the council, composed of two parents for each of the Academy's four grades, meets monthly to maintain continual contact and to exchange information. Those involved with the parent council note that small meetings are more conducive to discussion, unlike large meetings, where parents may be "talked at" by educators or administrators. Contact: Cathleen Floyd, 2801 St. Lo Drive, Baltimore, MD 21213-1393. ★ (410) 467-6307.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOPIC, CONSULT THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS:

Publications

Center for Workforce Preparation. *On Target: Effective Parent Involvement Programs.* Washington, DC, Author, 1994.

Conners, Lori J. and Joyce L. Epstein. *Taking Stock: Views of Teachers, Parents, and Students on School, Family, and Community Partnerships in High Schools.* Baltimore: Center on Families, Communities, Schools & Children's Learning, 1994.

Cornell Youth and Work Program. *A Parent's Guide to Youth Apprenticeship.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1994.

Jobs for the Future, Inc. *Voices from School and Home: Pennsylvania Students and Parents Talk About Preparing for the World of Work and a Youth Apprenticeship Program.* Somerville, MA: Author, 1990.

Rich, Dorothy. *Megaskills.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.

Organizations

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the nation's second largest teachers' union, covering all topics that concern teachers and schools, including school-to-work. ★ 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20001 ★ (202) 879-4434.

American College Testing (ACT), provider of the ACT assessment for college admissions, helps teens and adults make decisions about education and careers. ★ 2201 N. Dodge Street, Iowa City, IA 52243-0168 ★ (319) 337-1000.

National Career Development Association provides products and services for the career development profession, business, and the public. ★ 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304-3300 ★ (703) 823-9800 ext. 309.

National Council of La Raza (NCLR) works to improve opportunities for all Americans of Hispanic descent and to promote community and family involvement in education. ★ 1111 19th Street NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20036. ★ (202) 785-1670.

National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teachers' union, provides a variety of services to teachers and parents. ★ 1201 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036 ★ (202) 822-7727.

National Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) provides information to parents and PTAs on building home-school relationships, developing parenting skills, improving learning at home, and promoting parent-child communication. ★ 700 North Rush Street, Chicago, IL 60611. ★ (312) 670-6782.

For more information about STW Resource Bulletins, please contact:

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